

“They That Are Born There Talk Good English”: Hugh Jones Describes Virginia’s Slave Society, 1724

Slavery and a society based on slave labor were well established in the Chesapeake region by the third decade of the 18th century. Hugh Jones described the beginnings of African-American culture as slavery spread in the Chesapeake. Virginia’s slave population grew from 3,000 in 1680 to 13,000 in 1700. It further expanded to 27,000 by 1720. Despite Jones’s rosy picture, he effectively depicted the enslaved population’s contact with whites, the growth of a smaller group that spoke English, and the emergence of strong kinship bonds facilitated by a naturally increasing population, a first in the New World. Hugh Jones arrived from England and served as a minister in Jamestown and professor of mathematics at William and Mary. He authored *The Present State of Virginia* (1724) where he described the distinctive form of society emerging in Virginia of large and small landowners, poor white laborers, and enslaved Africans.

The Negroes live in small cottages called quarters, in about six in a gang, under the direction of an overseer or bailiff; who takes care that they tend such land as the owner allots and orders, upon which they raise hogs and cattle, and plant Indian corn (or maize) and tobacco for the use of their master; out of which the overseer has a dividend (or share) in proportion to the number of hands including himself; this with several privileges is his salary, and is an ample recompence for his pains, and encouragement of his industrious care, as to the labour, health, and provision of the Negroes.

The Negroes are very numerous, some gentlemen having hundreds of them of all sorts, to whom they bring great profit; for the sake of which they are obliged to keep them well, and not overwork, starve, or famish them, besides other inducements to favour them; which is done in a great degree, to such especially that are laborious, careful, and honest; though indeed some masters, careless of their own interest or reputation, are too cruel and negligent.

The Negroes are not only increased by fresh supplies from Africa and the West India Islands, but also are very prolific among themselves; and they that are born there talk good English, and affect our language, habits, and customs; and though they be naturally of a barbarous and cruel temper, yet are they kept under by severe discipline upon occasion, and by good laws are prevented from running away, injuring the English, or neglecting their business.

Their work (or chimerical hard slavery) is not very laborious; their greatest hardship consisting in that they and their posterity are not at their own liberty or disposal, but are the property of their owners; and when they are free, they know not how to provide so well for themselves generally; neither did they live so plentifully nor (many of them) so easily in their own country, where they are made slaves to one another, or taken captive by their enemies.

The children belong to the master of the woman that bears them; and such as are born of a Negroe and an European are called Molattoes; but such as are born of an Indian and Negroe are called Mustees.

Their work is to take care of the stock, and plant corn, tobacco, fruits, etc. which is not harder than thrashing, hedging, or ditching; besides, though they are out in the violent heat, wherein they delight, yet in wet or cold weather there is little occasion for their working in the fields, in which few will let them be abroad, lest by this means they might get sick or die, which would prove a great loss to their owners, a good Negroe being sometimes worth three (nay four) score pounds sterling, if he be a tradesman; so that upon this (if upon no other account) they are obliged not to overwork them, but to cloath and feed them sufficiently, and take care of their health.

Several of them are taught to be sawyers, carpenters, smiths, coopers, etc. and though for the most part they be none of the aptest or nicest; yet they are by nature cut out for hard labour and fatigue, and will perform tolerably well; though they fall much short of an Indian, that has learned and seen the same things; and those Negroes make the best servants, that have been slaves in their own country; for they that have been kings and great men there are generally lazy, haughty, and obstinate; whereas the others are sharper, better humoured, and more laborious.

The languages of the new Negroes are various harsh jargons, and their religions and customs such as are best described by Mr. Bosman in his book intituled (I think) A Description of the Coasts of Africa.

The Virginia planters readily learn to become good mechanicks in building, wherein most are capable of directing their servants and slaves... .

The country is yearly supplied with vast quantities of goods from Great Britain, chiefly from London, Bristol, Liverpool, Whitehaven, and from Scotland. The ships that transport these things often call at Ireland to victual, and bring over frequently white servants, which are of three kinds, 1. Such as come upon certain wages by agreement for a certain time. 2. Such as come bound by indenture, commonly called kids, who are usually to serve four or five years; and 3. those convicts or felons that are transported, whose room they had much rather have than their company; for abundance of them do great mischiefs, commit robbery and murder, and spoil servants, that were before very good: But they frequently there meet with the end they deserved at home, though indeed some of them prove indifferent good. Their being sent thither to work as slaves for punishment, is but a mere notion, for few of them ever lived so well and so easy before, especially if they are good for any thing. These are to serve seven, and sometimes fourteen years, and they and servants by indentures have an allowance of corn and cloaths, when they are out of their time, that they may be therewith supported, till they can be provided with services, or otherwise settled. With these three sorts of servants are they supplied from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, among which they that have a mind to it, may serve their time with ease and satisfaction to themselves and their masters, especially if they fall into good hands.

Except the last sort, for the most part who are loose villains, made tame by Wild, and then enslaved by his Forward namesake: To prevent too great a stock of which servants and Negroes many attempts and laws have been in vain made.

These if they forsake their roguery together with the other kids of the later Jonathan, when they are free, may work day-labour, or else rent a small plantation for a trifle almost; or else turn overseers, if they are expert, industrious, and careful, or follow their trade, if they have been brought up to any; especially smiths, carpenters, taylors, sawyers, coopers, bricklayers, etc. The plenty of the country, and the good wages given to workfolks occasion very few poor, who are supported by the parish, being such as are lame, sick, or decrepit through age, distempers, accidents, or some infirmities; for where there is a numerous family of poor children the vestry takes care to bind them out apprentices, till they are able to maintain themselves by their own labour; by which means they are never tormented with vagrant, and vagabond beggars, there being a reward for taking up runaways, that are at a small distance from their home; if they are not known, or are without a pass from their master, and can give no good account of themselves, especially Negroes.. . .

It is a monkish opinion too prevalent with many still, that there is no good living without the bounds of their own cloyster. An abundance of English entertain the Chinese notion, that they are all fools and beggars that live in any country but theirs. This home fondness has been very prejudicial to the common sort of English, and has in a great measure retarded the plantations from being stocked with such inhabitants as are skilful, industrious, and laborious.

For these reasons, such persons of sense and resolution as have entered into projects for improvements in the plantations (who have evinced us, that all schemes are not bubbles) have been obliged for the generality to make use of the worst and vilest of mankind, for the execution of the noblest and most useful undertakings; though indeed continually several people of sense, vertue, and fortune, entertaining tolerable good notions of these affairs, have embarked themselves and families in such laudable and useful designs: But for the generality, the servants and inferior sort of people, who have either been sent over to Virginia, or have transported themselves thither, have been, and are, the poorest, idlest, and worst of mankind, the refuse of Great Britain and Ireland, and the outcast of the people.

These servants are but an insignificant number, when compared with the vast shoals of Negroes who are employed as slaves there to do the hardest and most part of the work; the most laborious of which is the felling of trees and the like, to which kind of slavery (if it must be so called) our woodcutters in England are exposed; only with this difference, that the Negroes eat wholesomer bread and better pork with more plenty and ease; and when they are sick, their owners interest and purse are deeply engaged in their recovery, who likewise are obliged to take all the care imaginable of the children of their slaves for their own great profit; so that the Negroes, though they work moderately, yet live plentifully, have no families to provide for, no danger of beggary, no care for the morrow.